Let's D.I.Y. #2

OFF THE PAGE: taking zine-making to the community

by
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Let's DIY II: Off the Page: Taking Zinemaking to the Community

This zine is written for zinesters who want their actions to speak as loudly as their words. Zine-making can really make a difference for people, and when individuals collaborate it spreads that influence, while at the same time strengthening community. In Let's D.I.Y. #1 we focused on how to conduct zine workshops to create collaborative zines. Here in #2 we're focusing on how to get those workshop opportunities by collaborating with community organizations. It's a big change to go from your individual zine work to group collaboration. We hope these tips and resources help you avoid common pitfalls and get you on your way with community involvement.

Why get involved with community groups?

Bringing your zine work into play with other community groups is a good way to stay motivated. It promotes zine making as a valid form of culture work, and gets you interacting with other people in a way that can inspire your own zine projects.

It's also a good way for you to reach new audiences for your zines, and for zine culture in general. Zine culture tends to be kind of insular, so it's good to reach out to a broad range of populations: elders, rural, at-risk-youth, people in recovery, homeless, and more. If you want to reach specific populations of people you may really need an established organization to do so, such as for homeless youth, prisoners, or people in recovery.

The act of collaboration itself is a way to improve the wider community. It's a learning experience for all participants, and an avenue for improving communication between people that may not normally interact much. It's also a way to break down hierarchies that can get in the way of greater social interaction within communities.

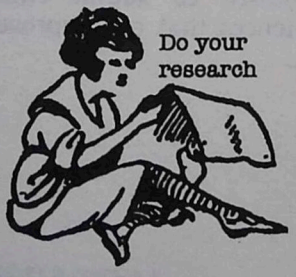
Bringing zine-making to a wider audience is also a way to contribute to social change. It can lead to interactions and experiences that can improve the fabric of all communities on many levels.

"...community arts practice is based on the belief that cultural meaning, expression, and creativity reside within a community, that the community artist's task is to assist people in freeing their imaginations and giving form to their creativity. This is in contrast to the establishment arts idea that only a lucky few - trained, professional artists - embody that ability. It is also in contrast to the old-Left idea... a sort of trickle-down theory... 'high culture for the masses' " (Arlene Goldbard, "Postscript to the Past" can be found on communityarts.net)

How do you begin a partnership with a community group?

The first thing you need to do (as an individual or group) is define yourself in terms that you can communicate to any group or person you want to collaborate with. Start writing: think about what's really important to you and how those ideas connect with zine-making. This is the basis for your mission statement, which will be the anchor for how you collaborate with others. Write a brief mission statement. It doesn't have to be complicated, just a few sentences that will help others get a picture of what you're about. Expect to do a few versions of you mission statement before you're done.

Once you've defined your anchoring ideas, think broadly about who you can collaborate with. You may want to start out collaborating with friends, but be open to working with groups that are not part of your usual social circle. While this may seem daunting, the rewards and skills you will learn will be invaluable. Think about how zine-making and zine-reading has benefited you (write your thoughts down), and then imagine who else would benefit in the same way. There are many ways to think of zines: as personal biography, skill-sharing, political, creative, etc. Thinking about this will help you see more possibilities of populations and organizations that might be interested in what you're doing.



Think about what type of collaboration will work for your group and any group you are interested in working with. Short-term and long-term collaborations are very different. Short-term collaborations don't require as much careful planning and monitoring of the partnership. For instance, one-time workshops or presentations are a good way to get started because they don't require as much planning, trust, negotiation, and commitment. We suggest doing several one-off sessions before considering a multi-session or other long-term commitment, because you will learn a lot about the process and how you feel about it by doing it. Long-term collaborations require close agreement between groups on the goals of the collaboration, and a lot of discussion and planning. This is especially important when working with youth and at-risk populations, for whom zine-making may bring up powerful emotional issues. Be honest about your capabilities, and always keep your original goals and ideals in mind when deciding who to work with and what to commit to.

> [For more on this read *Common Sense and Common Ground* by William Cleveland, online in the Reading Room of communityarts.net]

Identify possible partners and research them before you contact them. Try to get good contacts through referrals from friends, or community activists who's work you admire. This advance work is essential! The worst thing you can do is approach a community group and not be able to display some knowledge of what they do. This research will help you sort out your own needs too. Find models of successful partnerships that are similar, whether in your own community or by doing research online (see the Appendix). This research will also help you "learn the language" of the organization you are interested in working with, which will help you shape your own ideas in ways that fit with their model.

Define what you can offer specifically for each potential partnering group. Since many people you work with won't know how to interpret your background in zines (or perhaps other related skill areas), clarify what you have to offer in terms that relate to their project, and in terms that are practical. For example, some groups may be interested in the creative aspect of zine-making (an after-school youth art group), while another may be interested in them from a sociological perspective (a college classroom), while a third may focus on them as a grassroots media project (a politically based group).

The First Meeting: Be professional - you can do this and still be authentic. Don't just show up, but contact them ahead of time via email and phone (these days a phone call provides a more personal touch). Briefly explain who you are and why you'd like to meet face-to-face to talk about your interest in their group. Keep this initial meeting short. Demonstrate that you did your research on their group. Be prepared to explain yourself in terms related to what they do. Prepare some questions based on information you would like to clarify whether this would be a good partnership. The collaboration starts here - remember that both sides have needs to be met. Don't get sidetracked by your differences, but listen carefully in order to ascertain whether this would be a good match. Thank them for their time, and show an interest in what they're doing no matter how the meeting goes (pick up a brochure or flyer for an upcoming event. Even if things don't work out, if you really want to work with this group let them know of future successes you have, and keep abreast of theirs. Get back to them if the interview gave you some good ideas for your work. Get on their mailing list.

How Do You Maintain a Partnership?

The most important general idea is to collaborate thoughtfully. It's important to discuss all details (timelines, money, responsibilities), to avoid misunderstandings based on assumption. Collaboration means to share power. It's also important to make clear what you do need control over in the partnership. Be aware of gender, age, and ethnicity issues in leadership and communication styles. Trust is necessary, but the level of trust required will depend on the level of collaboration. If you feel a little unsure at first don't think in terms of "I don't trust you" but rather "I don't have any experience with you." Remember that most mainstream groups don't know anything about zines, so they may be a little hesitant at first. Plans will probably change, so be flexible.

How problems are dealt with is key. First, don't let them fester. It's essential to communicate directly and quickly. Follow through with your promises or admit that you can't. Everyone in community work aspires to do a lot, and everyone gets in over their head at some point, so don't be too embarrassed to admit it. If this happens see it as a learning experience for next time, and examine your planning to see where you can plan better next time. Above all, don't burn bridges. Even an unsuccessful partnership can teach you something, so thank them for that (even if months later), and treat everyone with respect.

How To Get Better At It

Develop ways to evaluate your project. It will help you improve your next project in terms of the planning, the collaboration, and the actual work aspect of the project. Having evaluation information gives funders a way to see your work in definable terms and to see that their money is well spent. Good evaluation information is also important for an established organization with whom you might work to justify why they offered the program (they probably have their own evaluation forms for this). It's also useful for marketing your work. For example, you can gather factual information to demonstrate that you work with underserved populations. For instance, if you are doing a single-session workshop you can easily use a short question form for participants to fill out. You can use a 1-5 rating scale to ask them their opinion on the workshop. You should also count how many people participated, and define population details such as gender, ethnicity, etc. You can also use these feedback forms to get contact information if you want to include people on a mailing list. Evaluations give you information to help tell the story of your group or project.

Pay attention to the Process and the Outcome. These are evaluation terms that are useful for looking at the success of your project. Questions to ask participants in order to evaluate the process might include: Was the time frame of the workshop appropriate? How were the instructors (were there enough?)? These questions assess the design of the project, and can help you adjust your work to be more successful. You should design questions to suit the audience. Questions to assess whether the outcome was reached do depend on your asking yourself what you want those outcomes to be before you start. Questions about outcome tend to be about quantitative data, and are usually aimed at organizers. They also depend on those process questions being answered by participants, especially in arts-based community work. For instance, if you have before and after questions (about knowledge or skills) you can turn this into statistical data. When you're first starting out doing simple presentations and workshops you probably won't get in too deeply with these sorts of questions, but it's important to start thinking in these terms in order to better define your work as you become more experienced and start delving into more serious collaborations.

"Yes, I'm returning your call about the zine workshop we're planning with your group."

Look for grants to help fund the work. The act of writing grants itself will improve your work by forcing you to be concrete and specific in your planning. Grants are well worth the effort because they allow you to do your work without going broke, and simply enough, they validate your work, which is a great boost. We all love zines because they're low-budget, but when you already have a job, this extra job is a strain on time and finances. While we are often willing to volunteer our efforts for something we love, there's nothing wrong with getting financial compensation when it's available. Remember, this is culture work! If you work with an established group they may need funding to cover this new activity because they have to pay staff, building costs, etc. When looking for a grant throw a wide net: arts, humanities, media, social change, youth, etc. Be careful, though, to really fit well with the grant you're applying for. See the Appendix for places that will help you find grants. Talk to others in your community who have gotten grants.. You can often get a copy to look at for ideas, and most local granting organizations will hold workshops to help you through the process. If no one in your group has ever written a grant before it's smart to find someone who will give you some guidance and give it a read-through before you submit it.

Most grants these days require that you be a legal non-profit or to use what's called a fiscal receiver. A fiscal receiver (also called a fiscal sponsor) is a legal non-profit willing to be your bank, so to speak. They believe in what you're doing enough to help you out by being the legal non-profit that will get the grant check, and in turn, write checks to you. While they are listed on your grant as a fiscal receiver, they should not interfere in your work or take control of your project in any way. However, you should expect them to ask to be kept up to date on your work, and to see that you are following through on what you described in your grant, because this process also reflects on them. This also means you should choose an organization you trust with the money. This is like a project collaboration, so approach it the same way, well ahead of the grant deadline.

Once you get a grant use the same professional approach and present your budget, invoices, etc. in a way that will reassure them that they've made a good decision. Keep track of your work and the grant's impact on it for a year-end report to the grant organization (each grantor will give you details on how to do this). If you don't get a grant, ask for feedback. Most grantors are very willing to help you improve. One of the best and simplest pieces of advice for writing a grant is to give them exactly what they ask for, no more, no less. Half the work is simply following the rules of the application.

Appendix

Information Resources

- **Community Arts Network: communityarts.net this site is a goldmine!!**
- San Diego Foundation for Change: foundation4change.org
- Independent Publishing Resource Center: iprc.org
- Culturework: aad.uoregon.edu/culturework
- Grrrl Zines A-Go-Go: gzagg.org

- Art In Other Places, William Cleveland
- The Citizen Artist, by Linda Burnham
- Spin Works! A Media Guidebook for Communicating Values and Shaping Opinion, by Robert Bray (www.spinproject.org)

Questions for Developing Partnership Agreements
(from The Center for the Study of Art and Community)

A. Background

1. What is our history with this organization?
2. What worked and what did not work in previous efforts?

B. Proposed Project (to be addressed by prospective partners)

1. Project Description (describe the actual project. Include logistics, costs, timing, facilities, personnel, and other relevant information)
2. What are we trying to accomplish through this partnership?
3. When the project is completed what will be the outcomes?
4. How will we know we have accomplished what we have set out to do?
5. How will this project serve our interests? Our mission? What will we get from this project?

6. What resources will be needed to successfully complete this project?
7. What resources are we prepared to contribute to this effort?
8. What resources do we expect our partner to provide?

C. Roles and Responsibilities

1. How will policy and program decisions be made on this project?
2. How will fiscal decisions be made?
3. Who is responsible for the various aspects of the project?
4. What external mandates exist, outside the partnership, that may effect the project?
5. Who owns the products or processes developed through the project?
6. If disputes arise among the partners, how will they be settled?

Grrrl Zines A-Go-Go, 2007
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